28: Jenness E-5 (1914-1916) 1946
ND8 Copper Eskimo ND8

ART

In the field of art the Copper Eskimo accomplished far less than their kinsmen in the eastern and western Arctic, not because they lacked the same gifts, but rather because they failed to develop them. In the decoration of their clothing they displayed a feeling for line and colour, a sense of balance and harmonious composition not surpassed by any other Eskimo group. They demanded symmetry in everything. The insertions on their coats, trousers, and stockings, and the arrangement of the lemming skin pendants, all were governed by this passion for symmetry. Thus, a woman who was sewing two pairs of caribou ears to the shoulders of her coat spaced them at even distances, with the larger pair on the outside and the smaller pair within at a slightly lower level. Symmetry governed also the shapes of many implements. No Eskimo group made trimmer tools and weapons, toggles, and buckles; and the splicing of wood, especially of arrow shafts, was amazingly accurate.

One may believe, therefore, that they possessed in full measure the artistic talents of other Eskimo, but that fashion kept these talents latent. They could have produced the delicate carvings and engravings in bone and ivory that we find in Alaska, and, to a lesser extent, in the eastern Arctic, but the impulse was lacking. They did, it is true, engrave a few simple designs, and make a few rough carvings, mainly for fishing lines and needle-cases; but the "picture-writing" of the western Eskimo, and the naturalistic shapes given to toggles, drum handles, and many other objects were conspicuously absent.

Weaving, except the finger braiding of sinew for sealing lines, was an unknown art, and painting almost equally unknown. The runners of two sleds bore a series of Y designs painted in red and black on their fore ends; otherwise, paint served only to colour skin. Needle-cases and bow-case handles usually bore engraved lines, but other objects only occasionally. The principal designs are shown in Figure 187. The ring-and-dot pattern was not very common, and

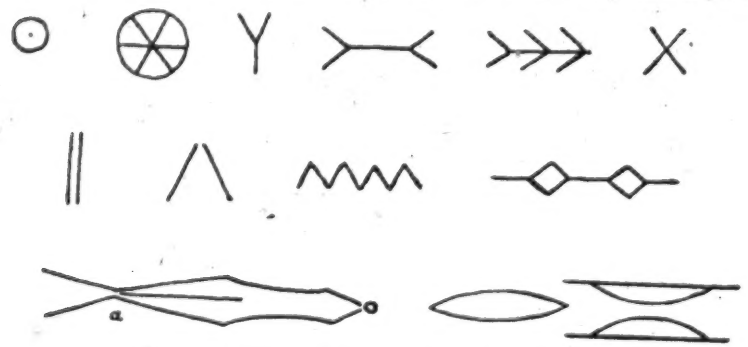

Figure 187. Typical design elements of the Copper Eskimo.

the diagonal lines inside a circle I saw only on a button (Figure 37*b*). The standard patterns were parallel straight lines and a Y in various combinations; these two were tattooed on the face and wrists (Figures 44, 45), painted, as stated above, on two sleds, inset as strips of fur or skin in the clothing (Figures 28, 29), and engraved on many small bone objects. Fully 60 per cent of the needle-cases were decorated with two Y patterns end to end inside a frame of straight lines (Figures 94, 95, 96), and the commonest design on bow-case handles (Figure 158) was another combination of the Y figure. Radiating lines (two or more), and zigzags, were not common except in tattooing. Rarer still were

29: Jenness E-5 (1914-1916) 1959
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names, Liver and Icehouse. Both seemed rather misleading; she was really neither choleric nor frigid, but a jolly, high-spirited old lady with the warmest heart imaginable, and a tongue more prone to gossip than was strictly advisable. She received us with open arms, and resigned to us half the platform in her hut, where we slept and stored all our possessions. Since her platform looked directly into the dance-house, the centre of social life, we saw everything that happened in the community, or heard it reported to our neighbours.

January was generally the coldest, darkest, and stormiest month in the year, the only month that the Eskimos really dreaded. Blizzards often confined them to their houses five days out of seven, and even if a hunter braved the storms he could find no seal-holes through the driving snow. Hunger then reigned in every hut, and the inmates shivered with cold as they extinguished their lamps one by one to conserve the oil. But the winter of 1914-15 was unusually mild. Blizzards were rare even in January, and they were separated by periods of calm weather when the hunters captured five and six seals daily. So the lamps burned brightly in all the houses and the natives were light-hearted and happy. They gaily assembled in the dance-house each evening to while away the hours with song and dance; and their medicine-men often gave weird performances, not to relieve distress, but simply to maintain their prestige and entertain their audiences.